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Dr. DANA'S

SERMON

On practical Atheiſm.

May 14th y 1796

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BRITISH MUSEUM

3195

The folly of practical atheism.

A

DISCOURSE,

DELIVERED IN

THE CHAPEL OF YALE-COLLEGE,

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The folly of practical atheism.

PSALM LIII. I.

The fool hath said in his heart, *There is* no God.

THE folly of practical atheism is the subject proposed for present consideration. The fool is not here supposed to deny the being of a God, considered as a *speculative* truth, but as it relates to *practice*; or the idea of a God considered as moral Governor, to whom he must give account. His practice declares the language of his heart to be this: *No God: I would there were none.* What influence his wish may possibly have on his opinion, we shall not tarry to enquire. It hath been much doubted, whether there ever was a speculative atheist. Be this as it may, the folly of another kind of atheism is to be laid open in the ensuing discourse. It is to be shewn that the practical atheist is a fool. His life declares the wish of his heart to be that expressed in the text. He is thus described in the following part of the psalm: "Corrupt are they, and have done abom-
"inable iniquity. God looked down from hea-
"ven

"ven upon the children of men, to see if there "were any that did understand, that did seek "God. Every one of them is gone back, they "are altogether become filthy: There is none "that doth good, no not one." St. Paul applies the passage to the body of the Jewish nation. *

According to this description of the atheist, he either neglects the worship of God, altho he may acknowledge his existence: Or he lives viciously, altho he attends to the externals of religion: Or he useth religion as a cloke to his wicked designs. Let us examine each of these cases.

1. To what end is the existence of God acknowledged, if his worship is neglected? To deny him our worship, is to all intents to say, There is no God. What could a speculative atheist say or do more? *He* doth not call upon God, because he maintains that no God exists. He acts consistently. For *he that cometh to God must believe that he is*. But the practical atheist admits that he is, and yet doth not come to him. Where is the material difference between denying him religious homage, and denying his existence?

The ancient Epicureans professed to believe a God, but denied his moral perfections and providence. They described him as a God at ease, indifferent to, and even ignorant of, the conduct of his creatures. Their own voluptuousness was but an imitation of their god. They who restrain prayer,

* Romans, iii. 10,——19.

prayer, cast off fear. They may possibly say, "We do not deny that God is to be worshipped, any more than we deny his being." May we not reply, as an apostle did in another and similar case? "Shew thy faith by thy works. The devils believe that there is one God, and tremble," and blaspheme.

2. Do any pay God an external worship, whose general course of life is a denial of his perfections and providence? Applicable to such are the words of St. Paul, "Be not deceived, for God is not mocked." Their religious performances declare one thing; their uniform practice, another. From which are we to determine whether they own or disown a God? Their actions say that they have no awe of God, no desire of his approbation, or fear of his displeasure. What less can we conclude than this, that, might they have their choice, there would be no God?

3. Such as use religion as a pretext to their sinister ends, may conceal their real character in a great measure from the world, and even from themselves. But is there more impiety in avowed atheism, than in making use of God and religion to patronise hypocrisy, and crimes which shock humanity? While men would be thought to do God service, yea, while they have thought themselves in the first class of his favorites, they have faught against him. In the judgment according to truth, the higher any one's pretensions, while the inward temper is most repugnant to religion,

ligion, the higher indignity is offered to God; the more are his perfections and exiſtence denied and reproached.

Is there a God of all perfection? Should we not then ſet him always before us? Should we not, in a ſteady courſe, ſolemnly recognize his being, perfections and providence? Should we not be habitually impreſſed with the contemplation of him in his works, his word, and his adminiſtration? Should not our hearts and lives, as well as our lips, expreſs our faith in him? If there is a God of all perfection, of what high concern is it, that we be conformed to him, and the objects of his ſpecial love?

From the general view we have taken of the practical atheiſt's character, let us proceed to ſhew that he is deſervedly pronounced a *fool*.

I. Were there no God, according to his wiſh, ſtill the exiſtence of a God is greatly to be *deſired*, and therefore it is folly to wiſh there were none.

The being of a God includes a wiſe, univerſal and perpetual providence, a moral government, the immortality of the ſoul, and future ineffable rewards for them who diligently ſeek him. It is the foundation of ſerenity and hope amidſt all the trials of life, and in the view of death. In the moſt favorable circumſtances which we can ſuppoſe on earth, man is conſcious to deſires and capacities to which no external things are adapted—deſires and capacities of a far ſuperior nature to the animal appetites and affections. At his beſt

ſtate,

state, he *walks through dry places, seeking rest*, but not finding it, unless he hath imbibed the principles of religion—is established in the belief of a God, who made and governs the world, consummately blessed in himself, and all-sufficient, of perfect moral rectitude, who delighteth in mercy, and will fulfil the desire of them that fear him.

Moreover, what a variety of circumstances are there, in which we cannot take outward satisfaction in the enjoyments of life, though surrounded with them; and which they would yield, were it not for such circumstances? Such are excruciating pains, languishing sickness, the loss of dearest connexions in life, or anxiety for them in their misfortunes and distresses, or affliction from their misconduct, or the calamities under which they are born and continued, or which may have come on them. In such circumstances man feels his need of the principles of religion.

Or could outward things satisfy us *at present*, were we exempt from all the troubles of life; yet we cannot but be thoughtful for the *time to come*. Death is the common lot of mankind, and must soon be our own lot. Persons of all conditions and ages die suddenly by various means. None of them return to us. We cannot promise ourselves another day, or hour. Shall we then take up satisfied with the world, when we know not what a day may bring forth? Suppose we shall die to-morrow, or this night, where shall we then be? No where! nothing! if there is no God, who

alone hath immortality. What a damp muſt the proſpect of ſpeedy annihilation caſt over all the pleaſant things of the world? Muſt it not turn all joy into heavineſs? Can the mind be reconciled to the thought, that in a little time, perhaps in one hour, we ſhall ceaſe forever! Whenever death ſhall come, we ſhall periſh as the beaſts, if there is no God. What pre-eminence then hath man above them? What a fool, how brutiſh, is he who would thus degrade the human ſpecies, next in the ſcale of beings to the angels! Is it not more eligible and wiſe to believe an after ſtate, free from all the encumbrances, pains, ſorrows and anxieties of this? a ſtate of unmingled, unceaſing happineſs, adapted to our intelligent, moral nature? The aſſured expectation of ſuch a ſtate can calm the mind, reconcile it to the ſufferings of the preſent time, diſpel the gloom of the grave, the houſe appointed for all the living, and make us more than conquerers in paſſing the vale of death.

The exiſtence of a God therefore is moſt deſirable. He who wiſheth there were none, wiſheth miſery to himſelf, and to mankind. Were his wiſh the real truth, it would be the higheſt wiſdom to embrace and act upon the contrary opinion, for the ſake of paſſing with eaſe through life, and cloſing it quietly and joyfully. If he is miſtaken who thinks there is a God, and conducts accordingly, he is not a loſer, but a gainer, by his miſtake, in life. He cannot repent his miſtake after

after death; nor can any reproach him with it, if death is a total extinction of being. So that even on the ſuppoſition there were no God, the believer of one is wiſe, and the diſbeliever a fool. The atheiſt is a fool, ſhould what he wiſheth turn out to be true. It is an happy deluſion to think and wiſh differently from him, whether we regard our own comfort, or the welfare of mankind—Happy to think and wiſh differently, provided we alſo *practiſe* differently. For to believe a God, and not live accordingly, can only alarm us with unneceſſary fears—Unneceſſary, I mean, on the ſuppoſition of the truth of atheiſm—But,

Secondly, if there is a God, they who live as though there were none, muſt be eternally *ruined*; and therefore the atheiſt is a fool.

It is the part of wiſdom to chooſe and act on that ſide which in all events will be moſt ſafe. If atheiſm is folly, even on the ſuppoſition of its truth, much more is it folly on the ſuppoſition of its falſhood. Admit that the being of a God is barely *poſſible*, what an hazard may the atheiſt run? The hazard is, that he may poſſibly be miſerable beyond expreſſion, in body and ſoul, forever. If the being of a God is *probable*, the hazard then is that he will probably be thus miſerable. And if the being of God is *certain*, the miſery of the atheiſt is not leſs ſo. How inconceivable then is his ſtupidity? Could he perſuade himſelf that the notion of a God is entirely a fiction, ſo as to be tolerably calm through life, and to have no other

apprehenſion

apprehenſion at death than that of annihilation; yet, ſhould he then find himſelf miſtaken, the conſequence is too diſmal to be expreſſed or conceived. Even the ſhadow of a probability that he may then find himſelf miſtaken is abundantly ſufficient to convict him of folly in not providing againſt ſuch probability—call it contingency, if you pleaſe. What wiſe man would run the ſmalleſt poſſible hazard, where ſuch a conſequence may be depending?

We have ſhewn that the atheiſt's opinion, acted upon, abridgeth him of the trueſt ſatisfaction in life, and cuts him off from all hope in death. What a dreadful leap doth he then take, if the oppoſite opinion ſhould be true! His error, not diſcovered till too late to be corrected, he muſt fruitleſſly lament, and experience its effects under the final diſpleaſure of that God who *is a conſuming fire*. Had he acted on the ſuppoſition that there is a God, he would have run no hazard, if this be a miſtake. For who could puniſh or reproach him for it? If he had worſhipped as God an ideal being, his error and his exiſtence would terminate together, and he would have enjoyed the temporary conſolation, which the practical belief of a Deity muſt afford in this ſtate.

Suppoſe atheiſm were the general opinion of mankind, and that a believer in God and true worſhipper of him muſt ſacrifice every thing dear in life, and life itſelf, to his belief and practice, would he not be the wiſe man, and all others fools,

fools, admitting the truth of religion? *Their* gain would be temporal, their loss eternal; but *his* gain would be eternal, his loss temporal.

Thirdly, it is the summit of folly to live in such a manner as must impel them to chuse that there were no God, when at the same time men *suspect*, and even *conclude*, there is one.

Such is the fool described in the text. His heart is at variance with his head. He acts against his own sentiments, as well as against the sentiment of all the world. For this principle, the being of a God, has had the consent of all mankind. The athiest "half believes a God;" why else doth he *fear* one? It is folly to fear the mere phantom of a Deity. If a Deity is merely a phantom, he thinks it a reality, or it would not terrify him. The psalmist observes, v. 5. con. "There were they in great fear, where no fear was." The vicious, the profane and atheistical scoffers at religion, as they have cause, are the greatest cowards, in certain circumstances. *The sound of a shaken leaf chaseth them*; and *they fly as from the sword, when none* are *pursuing* them. Many imaginary fears are the effect of guilt. In time of danger it takes from hardy veterans in vice all fortitude. When their iniquity doth but seem to have found them out, they betray guilt in their aspect, their behavior, their manner of defence; and sometimes make immediate confession.

"But these fears," you may say, "are produc-
"ed by the apprehension of *civil* penalties, not
"by

" by any ſenſe of a *God*, or of accountableneſs to " him." This, however, doth not account for the fears of the guilty, where no civil penalties are apprehended. It doth not account for their fear of death, from ſickneſs or otherwiſe. Nor is this merely a natural dread of diſſolution. Something within preſages an after reckoning, an after exiſtence. They judge themſelves, and naturally apprehend an higher judgment.

That ſuch as mock at ſin, and in the general courſe of life have no fear of God, are yet afraid when danger or death is nigh, proves that they believe there is a God, though they wiſh there were not. When their powers of reflection are by any means awakened, they are afraid of him. *O thou afflicted, toſſed with tempeſt, and not comforted!* why do thy thoughts trouble thee? What is it within thy breaſt, that agitates thee, and prevents thy repoſe? what that makes thee heavy in the midſt of laughter, and drives ſleep from thine eyes? If there is no God, thou mayſt certainly conclude that this officious intruder on thy peace is a liar; and needeſt not be troubled, becauſe it *writeth bitter things againſt thee*. Why ſhould the weakneſs of ſuperſtition, or ſickly fancy, cauſe thy countenance to turn pale, thy tongue to faulter, and thy joints to tremble? Haſt thou found by thy wiſdom that ſome crazy dreamer firſt ſtarted the notion of a God? that fear circulated it? and that it was inculcated to anſwer the ends of politicians? Why then art thou unmanned by the miſgivings

misgivings and forebodings of thine own mind? Why should these confute thy declaration, that there is no God?

The plain truth is this: The thoughtless, vicious and profligate, by their manner of life, bring themselves to say in their heart, "No God. Well "were it for us, if there were none. He is not "our God, our Father and friend. We are ene-"mies to his government, and have naught else "to expect but to be frowned from his presence. "O that there were no God! or that he had not "brought us into being!"

When men have lived without God in the world, they have the temerity to wish, what perhaps they dare nor utter, that God might not be. They are resolved not to alter their course. This, they are aware, must end in ruin, if God exists, and governs the world. Hence the only alternative left them is to wish that atheism were true. *Surely these are fools.* They are at variance with themselves. For while they wish there were no God, they also wish to die in favor with him. Can the atheist be named, who doth not most sincerely join with Balaam in his prayer: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his?" If this is even the atheist's prayer, judge ye whether his atheism is any other than practical. And is he not a fool to live as no one can be willing to die?—estranged from God? By wishing to die as the righteous man dieth, he commends the life of the righteous, the part cho-

sen

ſen and the courſe purſued by him. The pious man's end could not be preferable to that of the impious, unleſs his life were ſo. That choice or courſe, which ends well, muſt be pronounced wiſe: that which ends ill, muſt therefore be unwiſe. The atheiſt himſelf being judge, he lives and dies a fool; why elſe is it his wiſh that he may die the death of the righteous?

Would we determine on wiſdom and folly as relative to the characters and purſuits of men, let us follow them to the cloſing ſcene. Let us obſerve whether they go off the ſtage with honor or diſgrace. Is death the end of all men? Then they are wiſe who conſider their latter end—who refer their conduct in life to this ſolemn period, and act ſuch a part as they can then review with approbation. If the atheiſt cannot then approve his own part, but will be compelled to wiſh that he had acted the part of the godly man, is it without reaſon that we call him a fool?

Can any ſubject of enquiry be more ſerious and important than *this*, whether we ſo live as that it is our higheſt intereſt to ſuppoſe there is a God, or the contrary? Could men, either from ſceptical pride or diſſolute manners, fix down in the perſuaſion, that God is nothing but a name, they might then be exempt from the perturbations of guilt, and apprehenſions of a judgment. On this ſuppoſition, they would neither approve nor condemn any affections, volitions or actions in a moral view. Still, being endowed with forethought,

and

and obſerving the frailty of the human race, they could not but be anxious whether, or after what manner, they ſhall exiſt when they leave this world. If they are ſettled in the opinion of atheiſm, what but palpable darkneſs is before them? None of their friends who have been removed, return to inform them whether there is another life; or if there is, of what ſort. Atheiſm then doth not relieve their minds, naturally thoughtful for futurity, and ſolicitous to know what may be at and after death—an event which the wiſe and fooliſh alike expect.

But if the wicked rather *wiſh* there were not a God, than really *diſbelieve*, what madneſs hath led them to ſuch a wiſh? Shall they profeſs that they know and believe in him, and yet ſeldom have him in their thoughts, renounce his fear, deſpiſe his goodneſs, and abuſe his grace and patience? Shall their practice ſpeak this language, "Who is the "Almighty, that we ſhould ſerve him? and what "profit ſhall we have, if we pray unto him?" Is he the former of our bodies, and the father of our ſpirit? Do we live, and move, and have our being in him? Doth every good gift come from him? Hath he to all other gifts added that of a Redeemer, which indeed comprehends all things? Can he ſave or deſtroy? And ſhall his creatures, formed to ſhew forth his praiſe, and for whom he hath delivered up his own Son, forget him, and live as though they were ſelf-made, and ſelf-preſerved? as though their good were in their own

hands? as though they were not accountable? had nothing to hope from his favor, nothing to fear from his anger? "Underſtand ye brutiſh, "and ye fools when will ye be wiſe? He that "planted the ear, ſhall he not hear? He that "formed the eye, ſhall he not ſee? He that teach-"eth man knowledge, ſhall not he know?" Will you not call on his name in public or private? Or will you uſe it only to profane it? Or will you cry mightily to him in your calamity, or when danger is near; and yet not have him in all your thoughts in the day of health, ſafety and proſperity? Have you no concern with God, except in a time of extremity? and would you apply to him then only? Or have you to do with him at all times, in every place, in all circumſtances? Thoſe who fear before him habitually, who bleſs him at all times, and acknowledge him in all their ways, ſhall not be afraid of evil tidings. Their heart is fixed, truſting in the Lord. He hath not given them a ſpirit of fear. He is their refuge, and very preſent help in trouble. Such is the difference between religion and irreligion.

The atheiſt is a fool from *choice*, not from *neceſſity*. Were it owing to a want or imbecility of underſtanding that he ſaith there is no God, his folly would be his excuſe. But this is not the caſe. "The world by WISDOM knew not God. *Profeſſing themſelves to be* WISE, they became fools." The groſſeſt errors in religion, and atheiſm itſelf, proceed from an affectation of ſuperior wiſdom.

wiſdom. Thrô the pride of knowing more than they have faculties for, it comes to paſs that men know nothing as they ought to know. Hence they "put darkneſs for light, and light for dark-"neſs; bitter for ſweet, and ſweet for bitter; "and call evil good, and good evil."

How great is human depravity, that God ſhould be diſowned! that any of the human race ſhould indulge a wiſh in their hearts that HE were not! It is not conſidered what this horrid wiſh implies. But is *inconſideration* an excuſe? Is it not a crime? A God may be clearly ſeen in his works—particularly in our own frame. The idea of a God, if not innate, has been a part of education among all nations; it is demonſtrable, if we *aſcend* from effects to their cauſe, whether it be or not in the other mode of *deſcending* from cauſe to effect. His being and moral perfections are the only joy and hope of ſuch a creature as man, formed to contemplate and adore, capable of deliberating and preferring, naturally conſcious of liberty and accountableneſs, placed in this mixed ſtate, and apparently intended for another.

The government of an omnipotent Deity, the parent of the whole family in heaven and earth, is matter of rejoicing to that part of his family to which we belong, as well as to that above. Is it not then among the moſt affecting proofs of man's fall and corruption, that he ſhould practically deny the God that is above! Surely he muſt be a very different creature from what God made him,

him, before he could wish in his heart, that his Creator and Father were not! Would it be cruel to wish a numerous family of children might be left orphans! Would it be most vile and absurd were a child of the family to wish the father and head were taken away! What is this compared with *his* folly and vileness, who wisheth that all the offspring of God, angels and men, had no parent! What must the conduct be, in which such a wish originates? It is *his* wish who goes about seeking whom he may devour—*his* wish who left his own habitation by the eternal throne, and is compelled to say, "Fartheſt from God is beſt."

What has been discoursed should awaken reflection in those who have much regard to the eye of *man*, but little or no regard to the eye of *God*. All things are naked and open to the eyes of him with whom we have to do. This is forgotten, and practically denied, by all who do those things under cover of the night, or in retirement, which, should they come abroad, would fill them with fear or shame. To take pains in saving appearances, but no pains about the principles and ends of our actions, all which are weighed by a God of knowledge, is to deny that HE looketh at the heart. They who have a *form* of godliness, but deny the *power*, cherish this inward thought, that God doth not search the heart, in order to render to every man according to his ways. They who practise secret fraud, liars, false accusers, perjured

jured perſons, thieves, adulterers, envious perſons, practically ſay, that God's eye is not on them. They deny him in works, in the heart. When thoſe whoſe eye is evil towards others, learn the charity which envieth not—when the unclean become chaſte—when he that ſtole, ſteals no more, but worketh with his hands the things that is good, that he may give to him that needeth—when the perjured have no longer a right hand of falſhood—when the profane learn to fear HIM who holds not thoſe guiltleſs that take his name in vain—when liars ceaſe from falſhood—when they who have defrauded others, learn to live in honeſty—when they who have taken great pains to conceal their ſins from the world, ſhall take like pains not to ſin in ſecret—when they who have done their works to be ſeen of men, ſhall ſtudy to approve themſelves to God—Then all theſe will beſt ſhew that they believe a God. Then will they have reaſon to conclude, that his being and perfections are the wiſh and joy of their hearts. With him there is mercy, and plenteous redemption. The Savior of the world came to call all manner of ſinners to repentance.

Every one that doeth evil hateth the light. An *evil* heart is an heart of *unbelief:* It is inclined to deny or pervert the truth. Ahab ſaid of Micajah, "I hate him; for he never propheſieth good "unto me, but always evil." Micajah had told him the truth, and therefore was held as an enemy by Ahab, who cheriſhed as friends thoſe who propheſied lies. Suppoſe

Suppoſe a man of an evil heart may have juſt ſentiments of religion, and can draw a fine picture of it; ſuppoſe him to have all knowledge, and the faith of a martyr; yet he hath not love to God or men, and is *as ſounding braſs, or a tinkling cymbal.* If there be a God, we ought to love him with all the heart, and ſoul, and ſtrength and mind. It is good to draw near to him. They that are far from him ſhall periſh. The ſon in the parable, who, when commanded to work in the vineyard, anſwered very reſpectfully, *I go, ſir; and went not*, was as deſtitute of filial reverence as he who petulantly anſwered, *I will not.* Truſt not to external profeſſions. The divine command is, *My ſon, give me thine heart.* "Keep thine heart with all diligence; for out of it are the iſſues of life." Next to the love of God, your neighbor claims your attention and regard. The love of him ſhould be meaſured by ſelf-love. In other words, "Whatſoever ye would that men "ſhould do to you, do ye even ſo to them."

If we walk circumſpectly, not as fools, but as wiſe, we ſhall redeem time, and improve every talent, as good ſtewards of the manifold grace of God. *The wiſe ſhall inherit glory; but ſhame ſhall be the promotion of fools.*

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